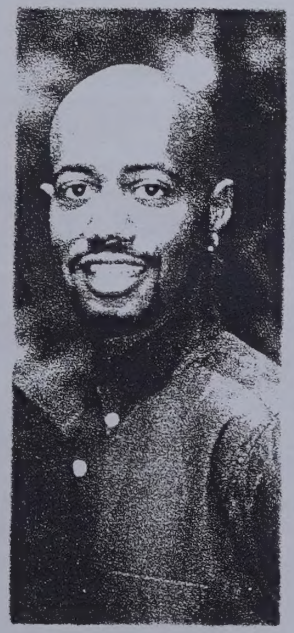
SOUTHERNERS ON NEW GROUND TAKES ON AFRICA

Craig Washington



SONG invites you to share our "Lessons From South Africa" at a community report and reception

Wednesday
November 17th
7PM - Auburn Avenue Research Library Auditorium at 101 Auburn Avenue (near Courtland St).

Come and hear about our experiences during the International Lesbian & Gay World Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa.

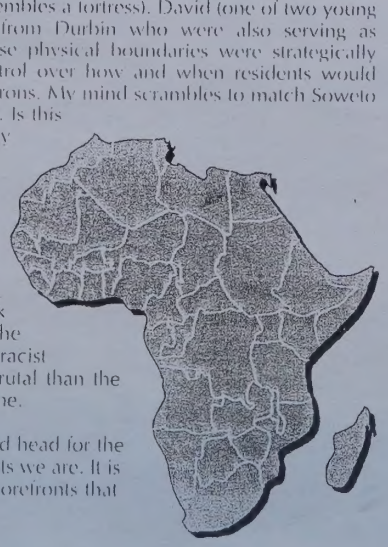
Your hosts will be SONG Co-Directors Craig Washington and Pam McMichael.

For more info, please call (404)-249 -8788 or email song4cw@aol.com.

On September 18th -25th, SONG Co-Director Pam McMichael, board member Termain Kyles and I attended the International Lesbian and Gay World Conference primarily because it was hosted in South Africa. Because South Africa, like the U.S. South represents a watershed victory not only for the oppressed people who earned it but also for those around the world who believe in freedom. Southerners On New Ground (SONG) is an organization that helps integrate work against racism, sexism and economic injustice into lesbigayrans organizing and work against homophobia into freedom struggles to build progressive movement across the South. We saw parallels between our work in the South and the level of coalition-building between gay activists, ANC organizers, artists, trade unionists and others who together helped dismantle apartheid. We obviously felt we had something to learn here.

Soweto, an acronym for South West Township. A township is like a community, like a village, like da hood, was once like a reservation, like a penal colony, like a ghetto under siege (excuse the redundancy), has always been home for thousands of black people in South Africa. On the 5th day of the ILGA conference Pam and I joined other attendants for a guided tour to this fabled place. It is one of many townships here, but for the rest of the world it stands alone as an example of black uprising victorious. Like Selma or Stonewall, it's the living landmark of a liberation movement. Like Haiti or Wounded Knee (in the U.S.of A.), it is a timeless battleground on which brown people fought back artfully with fists, handcrafted weapons and any other means necessary.

As we approach the township, I notice the layout of concrete structures that clearly mark its front border (including a sprawling hospital complex that resembles a fortress). David (one of two young Conference participants from Durbin who were also serving as guides) explains that these physical boundaries were strategically built to ensure state control over how and when residents would leave and enter their environs. My mind scrambles to match Soweto to an American reference. Is this another version of Donny Hathaway's "Yves,this is...The Ghetto"?! Echoes of poet/prophet Gil Scott Heron chanting "can you tell me what's the word...in Johannesburg?" recall the 70's when many black Americans first heard the funny word for a foreign racist system seemingly more brutal than the one from home sweet home.



We park, pile out and head for the marketplace like the tourists we are. It is a busy strip of tents and storefronts that display all kinds of meats (raw and cooked), fresh vegetables, fabrics, CDs, and other trinkets. I smile, my eyes brim with tears. I look around and I see Jamaica Avenue (Queens), I smell Flatbush Ave (Brooklyn)...all the familiar sights and aromas of multi-colored prints, spicy foods, oils and incense. I am at home abroad. I watch the salespeople clocking us. They receive us casually without beckoning us to buy their goods. I' m relieved. I don't want to be treated like an American until I'm ready. I am somewhat proud of my desire just to sort of blend in.

Along the footbridge most of the vendors have their wares laid out on small tables or mats on the ground. When I stop at a display of dried roots and assorted bottles, Linda, David's buddy, tells me these are medicinal herbs and potions. He describes the use of this leaf or that drink in detail. One root that resembles a string-covered potato is widely used as an immune booster. He speaks about the growing trend of combining Western and traditional therapies in treating HIV disease. I am reminded of how Americans, including many of us black folk, dismiss African healing and belief systems as superstition or even devil-worship.

On the next leg of the tour, we visit a residential area that has another vendor site. As soon as we pull out of the bus, I am called out. "Hello, my American friend!," one announces. The other, quite a handsome one, flashes a wide grin."Such a good-looking American brother, come let me show you what I've got here." Of course, I oblige. As I head toward the charmer, others try to call me over to their tables. This pointed attention brings an unexpected rush. I remind myself, it's not about me, it's about that American dollar but it still feels both exciting and perverse. In the span of half an hour, I felt transformed from everyday brotherman in a strange homeland to...an American. I work in the non-profit sector so it's not like I have major cash flow. But I am an American here and that identity carries it's own set of features including elevated status and privilege. I felt my nationality overriding any vestigial blood ties or kinship between me and these entrepreneurial brothers. Meanwhile the charmer suggests that I come back on my own and he could set me up to stay with someone for a few days, take me to some parties and learn more about Soweto. Was he (a)just being friendly, (b)tempting me to spend more money, (c) tempting me, period, (d) (b)and (c) , or (e)all of the above? I didn't return so I may never know.

We zipped over to another tent across the street which had some great tees and sweatshirts, books and videos. Just above my head was a T-shirt bearing a startling picture of a young man carrying a lifeless boy in his arms with a young girl walking alongside him. I'd first seen this photo in a Jet magazine some 20 years ago. Like the TV shots of civil rights workers being fire hosed, this was one of the defining images of the anti-apartheid movement. It disturbed me so, yet I kept coming back to stare at it. The vendor, a large women with a severe limp, noticed my fascination with it. "You see that shirt there." I turned and she was looking right at me. "The one who is carrying the boy is my son." She turned to her younger assistant and said, "and this is that girl in the picture." I couldn't think of anything to say that would make sense in this moment so I just nodded to both of them. Just as I thought to ask what had become of her son, she told me that he was a well-known activist and had disappeared a year after the photo was taken. I held her hand and said "Thank you, bless you." She said, "Thank you brother." All I could think of was the Ruby Dee character name, "Mother-Sister", 'cause that's how I felt her.

On our way to the Mandela home, we move through streets animated by children at play who smile and wave us by. The homes we pass range from very small ones (like American "shotgun" houses) to midsize 2-storied houses with tall iron or ceramic enclosures. David and Linda tell us that the larger homes are owned by celebrities. By most American standards they are modest. In a country where black people are disproportionately hit with unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, these residents are doing quite well. The former Mandela home is like this. Our guide greeted because with an engaging lecture about the house and the restrictions used to discourage blacks from owning homes. Black applicants were excessively scrutinized and the few who were "approved" often waited 20 or 30 years on some mysterious "waiting list". Only because Mandela had certain connections as a young man was the couple able to secure this one. He pointed out the bullet holes that peppered the brick facade built to shield it's now world famous inhabitants from such attacks. He spoke of the many times the police and others would fire at Winnie or try to poison her fierce guard dog. Under constant surveillance, Winnie, like her neighbors, could not entertain guests or they'd be accused of plotting against the state. For many years this was a wartime village, one which in turn bred some of the most effective and sophisticated revolutionary workers in the world. Buffalo soldiers in their own land.

After the Mandela home tour ended, I chatted with the guide some more. When he spoke of Soweto now he smiled. He stated that people here really do look out for one another and gave examples of a high spirit of communion between neighbors. I was glad to hear any accounts of black folks in South Africa pulling together and enjoying their lives in the land that is their birthright.

PART 1 OF A 3-PART SERIES